



Migration Profile ALBANIA

Executive summary

Albania is a parliamentary republic located on the Balkan Peninsula. The country has been an official candidate for accession to the European Union since 2014 with negotiations initiated in March 2020. Although Albania has experienced an increase in the number of immigrants in recent years, the country is mainly a country of emigration. This is confirmed by World Bank data: there were 49,200 international migrants in 2019, and between 2014 and 2019, emigration exceeded immigration by about 70,000 people. Having among the lowest GDPs in Europe, Albania's population takes advantage of emigration to cope: remittances are the largest source of foreign currency. The country registered 1.2 million emigrants in the first half of 2019 alone. First among the causes for this movement is economic outlook (57%), followed by social reasons linked to the lack of future prospects (19.4%), education (17.4%), family reasons (4.6%) and health (1.5%).

After the recent tightening of Serbia's border controls, Albania has once again become a transit country for immigrants travelling from Greece and Bulgaria to Western European countries. In the period from October 2018-April 2019, the Border and Migration Police in Albania, which actively cooperates with Caritas Albania for the identification and assistance of applicants arriving on national soil, identified over 3,500 incoming migrants, with the regions of Gjirokastra and Korca on the Greek border as the main access points.

Finally, an important role is also played by the so-called return migration, with Albanians who previously emigrated returning to the national territory: in fact, between 2013-2017, most of the 147,000 Albanians who had applied for political asylum in European countries have subsequently returned to Albania.

The main laws with regard to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are the Law on Foreigners 108/2013 and the Law on Asylum n. 121/2014. Several articles of the Penal Code deal with human trafficking, with a specific focus on minors. The problem remains widespread in the country, which is mainly a country of origin for trafficked persons, in spite of increasing efforts to fight it.

Country profile

I. Basic information

Albania is a parliamentary republic located on the Balkan Peninsula and bordered by Montenegro to the northwest, Kosovo to the northeast, Macedonia to the east and Greece to the south. Tirana is the national capital. The area is 28,756 km², and its coastline is bathed by the Adriatic Sea, and the Ionian Sea for 72 km. The terrain is mainly hilly and mountainous, and the climate is mainly continental inland and Mediterranean along the coast.

Albania has been an official candidate for membership of the European Union since 2014, with final negotiations begun in March 2020. It is a member of the United Nations, NATO, OSCE and the Council of Europe. The population of 3,057,220 is mainly concentrated in the districts of Tirana (31.3% of the total), Fier (10.3%) and Durrës (10.1%). The population growth rate is -0.11% (2020), with a life expectancy of 76 years for men and 81 for women. In 2017, the country's GDP was USD 12.5B, one of the lowest in Europe. Most of the GDP is produced by the tertiary sector (54.1% in 2017), followed by the secondary sector (24.2% in 2017) and finally by the primary sector (21.7% in 2017).

According to the latest (2011) census, the ethnic composition of Albania is dominated by Albanians (83%), followed by Greeks (0.9%), Armenians (0.3%), Roma (0.3%), Macedonians (0.2%), Montenegrins (0.01%), the so-called Albanian Egyptians (0.1%) and an unspecified 15.6%. This proportion is also reflected in the languages spoken in the country. The official language is Albanian, spoken by 98% of the population. In the far south, there is a small part of the population that speaks Greek; in the north-west, there is a Serbian linguistic minority; in the east, a minority that speaks Macedonian. Italian too, is one of the most popular languages used: it is spoken by 73% of the population.

Again according to the latest census, 58.79% of the population is Muslim, followed by 16.92% Christians, 2.5% atheists, 5.49% non-practitioners and 13.70% of the population who preferred not to answer the question. Specifically, Roman Catholics make up 10.03% of the population, and are the largest Christian group in the country. Orthodox and Evangelicals represent 6.75% and 0.14% respectively. While there is a diversity in religions, they are intermingled, with mosques and churches often a short distance from each other.

II. International and internal migration

In recent years, Albania has seen an increase in the number of immigrants into the country, but it remains principally a country of emigration. According to the World Bank, the total number of international migrants was 49,200 in 2019, of which 52.8% in the 0-19 age group, 39.6% in the 20-64 age group and 7.6% over 65. Nevertheless, between 2014 and 2019 the difference between the number of migrants and the number of immigrants produced a negative migration rate of

-70,000.

According to data provided by the Albanian Institute of Statistics, in 2018 the number of foreigners with residence permits was 14,162 people, which was 9.7% more than in 2017. Of these, 9,203 were men and 4,959 women. Fifty-eight percent came from European countries (8,212 people), followed by countries in Asia (4,022) and, finally, from America, Africa and Oceania (1,928). Among the principal European countries of origin are Italy, Turkey and Kosovo. The main reasons for this type of migration include work (49.1%), family reunification (23.3%), humanitarian reasons (18.1%) and education (4.5%).

Also in 2018, 6,893 irregular foreigners without the necessary documentation were identified, most of them from Syria (3,089 people), followed by Pakistanis (1,246), Iraqis (671), Palestinians (395), Algerians (378), Moroccans (344) and another 770 individuals from other countries. According to data provided by the Albanian Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were 4,386 applications for political asylum in 2018, with applicants essentially coming from the same countries of origin as identified by irregular immigration tracking, with most coming from Syria. However, only 16 of these applicants have obtained international protection, most of whom from Palestine. Seventy-eight applications have been suspended, almost all of them pertaining to applicants of Syrian origin.

Minors are a particularly vulnerable group of migrants: 322 minors were arrested in the first half of 2018. Most of them were minors from Syria who then applied for asylum. After Serbia tightened its border controls, Albania has recently returned to being a transit country for immigrants travelling from Greece and Bulgaria to Western European countries. For this reason, as early as the summer of 2018, around 45 Frontex agents - the European Border and Coastal Guard Agency - arrived in the country and had spread out at various points along the border. Moreover, in the period from October 2018 to April 2019, the Border and Migration Police in Albania identified over 3,500 migrants arriving in the country, with the regions of Gjirokastra and Korca on the Greek border as the main access points.

III. Emigration and skilled migration

As one of the countries with the lowest GDP in Europe, migration plays a key role among the coping strategies used by the population: in the first half of 2019 alone, for example, the country registered 1.2 million emigrants. In fact, Albania is also one of the countries where remittances are the largest source of foreign currency, surpassing even the Foreign Direct Investment and Development Aid received, with 1.458M USD dollars registered in 2018 alone.

According to the Migration Data Portal, in 2018, 15.2% of the population declared their intention to leave Albania. Among these, the majority were between 18 and 40 years of age; 52% of the population in this age group declared their intention to emigrate. This percentage is increasing and its causes are mainly social and economic. Young people want new prospects and opportunities, considering that in 2019 the unemployment rate of the general population

was 15.1%, with youth unemployment at 32.7%.

Economic considerations are one of the main causes of emigration, which accounts for 57% of migrants' motivation. Then come social reasons linked to the lack of a positive future (19.4%), education (17.4%), family reasons (4.6%) and health (1.5%).

Among the principal destinations of emigration from Albania are Germany (21.7%), the United States (16.4%), Italy (15.7%), Greece (14.4%), the United Kingdom (11%), France (3%), Canada (2.7%), Switzerland (2.3%), Sweden (2.3%) and Austria (1.3%). While in the past, Greece and Italy were the first choice for Albanian emigration, today there is a greater tendency to move to Germany, especially among young people. The national phenomenon of brain drain is constantly increasing, with engineers, computer specialists, doctors and nurses emigrating to Germany where they might find work in their field since Germany recognizes their degrees.

A significant number of migrants from Albania are unaccompanied minors who leave in the hope of a better education or to earn money to help their families. In Italy in April 2019, for example, according to the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, there were 8,131 unaccompanied minors of different nationalities, of whom 21% were from Albania: of these, 93% were male, mostly (86%) aged 16 and 17 years.

Finally, "return migration" (Albanians who previously emigrated and then returned) is also a significant factor. Peaks occurred between 2009-2013 and 2016-2018: in the first case, the reasons certainly included the economic crisis and the high unemployment rates in Greece and Italy during this time, while in the latter period, there were large numbers of asylum seekers in Germany and other European countries. According to the European Asylum Support Office, between 2013-2017, about 147,000 Albanians applied for political asylum in European countries; most of these people subsequently returned to Albania.

IV. Forced migration (IDPs, asylum seekers and refugees)

In 2019, around 12,000 people used Albania as a country of transit. Given the current situation on the border between Greece and Turkey, this figure is not expected to decrease. Internally displaced persons must be added to this number: the Internal Monitoring Displacement Centre, for example, states that there were 6,619 internally displaced persons in the country due to natural disasters; in particular 1,367 displaced by earthquakes, 5,246 by floods and 6 by tsunamis.

When four Eastern European nations decided to close their borders to incoming migrants in March 2016, Albania became a more important transit station for asylum seekers, refugees, irregular migrants and victims of trafficking. Arrivals were mainly from Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen and Iran, following the Balkan route from Turkey and Greece to the heart of Europe. Instead of passing through Serbia and Macedonia, they focused more on countries such as Bulgaria and Albania. In fact, Albania eventually became the final destination for many of these people who had been demoralised by

the closure of countries such as Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia and Hungary. Further evidence is in the increase in asylum applications registered in Albania, although not all those who apply for asylum then decide to stay for the long term: applications rose from 307 applications for international protection to 3,000 in the first half of 2018, for example.

In particular, the village of Trstenik, in the district of Korca, is one of the first points of arrival of illegal migrants from the Middle East, given its proximity to Greek detention centres. In fact, dozens of Syrian and Iraqi migrants are stopped daily by the Albanian border police and Frontex. Despite this, just as many manage to cross the border, stop in Albanian villages in search of food and clothing, and then set out again. Thanks to the joint operation of the border police and Frontex since 2018, migrants who are stopped are sent to the Reception Centre in Babrru, near the capital, which has about 180 spaces available. Most decide to return to Greece or try to flee to Western Europe again and just a few of them actually apply for protection. Some really intend to stay in the country; others hope to use the time needed to find a solution to move to Bosnia or Montenegro from which they can later reach Germany, Denmark or other Western European countries.

Considering the increase in the flow of migrants to Albania, this highlights the need for an increase in the overall reception capacity of the country, which is currently 400 places. The National Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Tirana can accommodate up to 180 people; another 75 people can be temporarily accommodated at the southern border of the country, at the Municipal Centre (15 people) and at the Temporary Registration and Reception Centre for Irregular Migrants (60 people); and a facility on the border with Montenegro, provided by Caritas Albania, has an additional 120 places. No centres specialize in the reception of women and minors at risk.

V. Victims of human trafficking

According to the US Department of Homeland Security's Trafficking in Persons report of 2019, Albania is making increasing efforts in the fight against human trafficking but does not fully meet the minimum requirements for its elimination. Among its efforts, there are updates on procedures related to the identification of victims, the establishment of specialised training courses in human trafficking for Border and Migration Police, an increase in the budget allocated to the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, and, finally, the adoption of the National Action Plan 2018-2020.

Nevertheless, exploitation and trafficking in human beings are widespread in the country, which appears to be mainly a country of origin of trafficked persons. In fact, traffickers exploit mainly local victims in Albania as well as abroad, in countries such as Kosovo, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, North Macedonia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Albanian women and children are subject to sexual exploitation and forced labour in the country, especially during the tourist season, with children usually used for forced begging or other types of work, such as selling small tourist items. Albanian minors, and in particular those from

Roma communities and so-called Albanian Egyptians, are exploited in some regions for seasonal work and begging, in addition to cases of child exploitation for drug trafficking. Finally, as far as foreign victims is concerned, these are mainly women from European countries and the Philippines, victims of sexual exploitation and forced labour: irregular migrants from Asia are often used for domestic work in the homes of the wealthiest families in the country and subject to domestic slavery. The most at risk are migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa who are passing through Albania in hopes of reaching Western Europe.

In 2018, the Albanian State Police investigated 38 cases of human trafficking with 51 suspects (compared to 69 cases with 80 suspects in 2017): of these, nine were accused of child trafficking (compared to 22 in 2017). Victims were more numerous than suspects: in 2018, the Albanian government and NGOs identified 95 official and potential victims (compared to 105 in 2017), of whom 28 adults and 67 minors, 60 male and 35 female. Only one of these victims was foreign, while the rest were Albanian origin.

VI. National legal framework

Within the government of Albania, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health and Social Prevention and the Ministry of Justice are the principal actors with regard to migration policies. The key legislation in the field of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is the Law on Foreigners 108/2013, which deals with the regulation of travel documents, visas, stays, family reunions, etc. This law has undergone several amendments* and improvements: in 2016, for example, Law Number 74 contained a number of additions to the Law on Foreigners as well as a Joint Instruction (Number 264, of 11.01.2016) regarding cooperation among the institutions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Intelligence Service in the area of issuing visas to foreigners.

The Law on Foreigners also brought improvements to procedures related to the treatment of irregular migrants, including the fight against irregular migration and the treatment of unaccompanied foreign minors. The Law on Asylum No 121/2014, drafted in accordance with European directives, provides the conditions and procedures for granting or withdrawing political asylum, subsidiary and temporary protection in the Republic of Albania. It also covers the rights and duties of asylum seekers, refugees, persons enjoying temporary or subsidiary protection, as well as the conditions for their integration on the national territory. This law also provides for the possibility to appeal against decisions taken on whether or not to grant international protection to asylum seekers and refugees: the only authority responsible for the appeal process being the National Commission for Asylum and Refugees, whose action and composition are regulated by Law no. 206 of 16.03.2016.

Regarding human trafficking, this crime was officially recognised in 2001. This was followed in 2005 by the adoption of a National Action Plan on Human Trafficking, which was also renewed at the end of its period of implementation. Specifically, Articles 110(a) and 128(b) of the Penal

Code prohibit trafficking in human beings for sexual and labour exploitation, with penalties ranging from 8 to 15 years imprisonment. Minors, trafficking of whom is prohibited by Article 128/b of the Penal Code, as well as Articles 114, 114/a, 115, 117 and Article 26 of the Law for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, also merit separate mention.

Finally, several policies and action plans have been launched in this field, beginning with the first Albanian migration strategy of 2004. The National Strategy for Integrated Border Management 2014-2020 is among the most significant and current migration policies of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. This Strategy was adopted for coordination and cooperation between the authorities and agencies involved in border security in order to have more effective and secure border management systems, allowing for open but controlled borders. With regard to migrants legally and regularly residing outside national borders, there is also the National Strategy for Diaspora and Migration 2018-2024, which aims to provide Albania with a comprehensive diaspora policy and alignment with EU integration policy guidelines as well as its management in accordance with international standards.

VII. Main actors

The State

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities is the authority in charge of coordinating and managing the implementation of the National Action Plans and National Migration Strategies, as well as policies on the migration of workers, both domestic and foreign, on Albanian soil. Its Directorate for Migration Policies is responsible for the management of the migration phenomenon and related policies.

The Ministry of Interior is another principal actor on migration in Albania. Its Department of Border and Migration within the State Police is responsible for border control and prevention of illegal activities conducted across national borders, as well as the implementation of readmission agreements between Albania and other countries. It also includes the Directorate of Asylum Applications and the Directorate against Trafficking in Persons.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another important player, contains the National Institute of the Diaspora, a governmental entity in charge of policies regarding the Albanian diaspora.

The Catholic Church

Over the years, Albania has been transformed into a transit country on the Balkan route – from the Middle East and Africa, via Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and then Croatia, and thence further into Europe. One of the main actors of the Catholic Church in Albania is Caritas Albania, which has been active there since its founding in 1993. While Albania has become even more of a transit country over the past three years, Caritas has been engaged daily in helping migrants, providing them with facilitation services for political

asylum, quality services for basic needs as well as protection services, through cooperation with the border police and other local authorities.

Caritas Albania has its main office in the capital Tirana with about 20 employees and over 100 volunteers. It has additional local offices operating in six different dioceses: Shkodra Caritas, Caritas Dashboard, Sapa Caritas, Caritas Lezha, Caritas Rreshen and Caritas Jug. To date, its core mission includes ensuring access to social and health services, action against human trafficking, emergency aid and social development. In order to do this work, Caritas Albania has established and maintains a relationship of cooperation with the public security authorities on the border to identify cases of exploitation, violence and human trafficking as well as providing assistance. Right after people are arrested, the border police informs Caritas so that it can provide them with the necessary assistance, especially when such arrests take place during the night, when pre-screening procedures cannot be carried out and detained people need accommodation which, given the lack of state facilities, is provided to them by Caritas.

With regard to humanitarian aid provided by Caritas Albania, it is essential to work with Caritas members such as Caritas England & Wales (CAFOD) to facilitate aid and rehabilitation of areas devastated by floods, landslides, climate emergencies for people living in rural areas, and the Catholic Relief Services (CRS). CRS resumed operations in Albania in 2014 after eight years of absence from the country. Among its primary objectives is the implementation of the action plan related to human trafficking through cooperation with Caritas Internationalis and the local churches.

In the past, the International Catholic Migration Commission had also played a key role for victims of trafficking and for the protection of women and children. Today, the Commission continues to work in cooperation with non-governmental and governmental organisations dealing with issues related to human trafficking in Albania.

Two other actors can be mentioned. JRS Kosovo offers services particularly to asylum seekers in the reception centre near the city of Pristina, including language courses to help them integrate. SHIS, founded in 1998, is one of the NGOs on the ground and is particularly focused on the development of education for the promotion of human dignity based on Catholic social teachings.

International organizations

One of the main contributors the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which began operating on in Albania in 1992 (although the country officially became a member of IOM in 1993). Since then, IOM has been supporting the government in its efforts and progress in migration management.

The UNHCR is also actively collaborating with the Asylum Department and the Border and

Migration Police. The primary objective of this collaboration is to strengthen access to international protection and to safeguard the procedures and modalities related to it, in particular as regards access to information and legal representation of applicants.

The Red Cross is also very active in the country, and has done major work both at local and national levels, providing support that has become visible and fundamental particularly following environmental disasters such as the earthquake that struck the country in 2019. It has helped by deploying teams of doctors and volunteers to provide relief to those affected, assisting the injured in hospitals, distributing meals and basic necessities as well as providing psychosocial support to those affected by the earthquake.

Other organisations

Among the most active non-governmental organisations in Albania in the field of migrants and refugees is Refugee and Migrant Services in Albania (RMSA). It has an office in Tirana and provides social and legal assistance to refugees and asylum seekers for their integration in the country.

There is also a number of others: Vatra Psychosocial Centre "The Hearth", Different & Equal (in Tirana) and TjeterVizion (in Elbasan) which work in collaboration with the National Centre of Reception for Trafficking Victims for the identification and assistance of adult victims; World Vision (in Tirana) which offers support for identification in different areas of the country; Arsis, specialized in child victims of trafficking, providing them with a range of assistance; All Together against Child Trafficking (Se Bashku Kunder Trafikimit Te Femijeve (BKTF) and Save the Children Federation.

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